

REPORT ON CHURCH MEMBERSHIP (1961)

PREFACE

The Conference of 1958 directed the Committee 'to consider and report on the place of our baptized young people in the body of Christ, defining clearly the conditions under which they should be received into membership, bearing in mind the claim of the Methodist Church to a place in the Holy Catholic Church and the particular situation surveyed in section IV 3 (g)⁸¹ of the report of the Commission on Rural Methodism'. Section IV 3 (g) of this report reads:

'It is useless to urge that greater care should be taken in the preparation of young people for church membership when the very people we ought to be preparing were lost to us four years earlier. We are convinced that unless Methodism is prepared to recognise children of the 12/14 age group as part of the Church – and we think 12 years, when the child comes to new status in the secondary school, is a significant age – in a formal ceremony in every country village, and as part of our regular evangelical work, there is little prospect of our village societies ever being able to produce a well balanced church family. It is a very serious matter that under present conditions the work of our village Sunday Schools bears so little fruit in terms of adolescent conversion and church membership.

We are not happy about the equivocal status of Junior Membership in our Church theory, or of the lukewarmness with which it is – perhaps consequently – applied in so many quarters. We judge that the time is more than ripe for the Methodist Church to make up its mind firmly, and without delay, on the theology of its membership. When Methodism was a Society within the Church of England, according to its origins, admission was rightly restricted to adults, and exclusion could be ruthlessly applied to those who failed to maintain its high standards, because neither the one nor the other was related to communicant membership of the Church. Now that Methodism claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church it should define clearly the place of its baptized young people in the Body of Christ, and consider when, and under what conditions, they should be received into membership.

We would ask the question – If it be right (as Methodism asserts that it is) to ask a boy of 12 years to 'decide for Christ' on Young People's day, and if we expect that a decision so given shall be a real decision accompanied by a real experience of Christ – and we have no right to seek it otherwise – then by what process of reasoning or theological argument do we hesitate to bring him into the fellowship of the Church, and receive him after due preparation and testing, as a real part of the Body of his Lord sharing in the Communion of His Body and His Blood? It is obvious that he could not assume his constitutional responsibilities and privileges until he becomes 17 or 18 – an event that might be celebrated as a 'coming of age' – but this is something quite distinct from the matter of church membership itself.

We believe that if this matter were settled it would resolve one of the most critical problems of our country youth work, and would bring many more young people into the fellowship of the Church than are coming at present, whether through

⁸¹ Erroneously referred to as 'section IV 3 (b)' in the Minutes of Conference 1958. p.58

Methodist or Anglican doors, and would enable us to nurture them in the faith in a way that is impossible today.

Until this issue is settled we commend the 'Order of Service in which the Church rejoices with Boys and Girls who have given themselves to Jesus Christ', published by the Methodist Youth Department and the Church Membership Committee, though we are not happy about the title. With suitable emendations this might be the basis for an order of service for receiving this lower age group into church membership should Conference eventually decide on such a policy.'

The Conference of 1958 and 1959 also referred to the Committee the suggestion that 'Confirmation' be adopted in place of 'Public Reception of New Members', and the Conference of 1959 asked the Committee to report on the suggestion that Junior Membership be abolished.

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY BAPTISM

The question of Church Membership according to the teaching of the Methodist Church cannot be understood except in reference to its teaching on Holy Baptism, which is set out at length in the 'Statement on Holy Baptism', adopted by the Conference of 1952.⁸² This makes it clear that the 'Order of Service for the Baptism of Infants' is a service 'of reception into the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church'; and that 'when an infant is baptized, he is received into the new Israel of God'. Thus every child who is baptized with water in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, has been received at Baptism into the congregation of Christ's flock.

Moreover 'a solemn obligation to Christ, the Church and the child, rests upon parents to present their children to Christ in Baptism'; 'Baptism is an obligation resting upon everyone desiring to be a member of the Methodist Church', and in case of those not baptized in infancy 'it should be expected that they present themselves for the "service of Baptism for those of riper years" before being received into Church Membership'.

ENTRY INTO THE CHURCH IN THE BIBLE AND IN SUBSEQUENT HISTORY

In the Bible the outward sign of entry into the Church is Baptism, on which we have no need to repeat what was said in the report of 1952. But the Bible throws no direct light on the problems connected with the entry of children. There are, however, certain passages which refer to a rite subsequent to Baptism, namely the imposition of hands, in connection with the gift of the Holy Spirit. The one clear case is Acts 8, 14-17, where Baptism was not followed by the descent of the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit did come after the imposition of hands. In Acts 19, 1-7, both Christian baptism and the imposition of hands immediately precede the gift of the Spirit. In Acts 9, 17-18, the imposition of hands is partly connected with healing, though the Spirit is also mentioned; in any case, it precedes Baptism. In the more normal procedure Baptism also is immediately followed by the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2, 38; 1 Cor. 12, 13), or even, exceptionally, preceded by it (Acts 10, 44, 48)⁸³. Thus it is not possible to say

⁸² Minutes, 1952, pp. 225-30

⁸³ There are other references in 2 Tim. 1, 6, which may, however, refer to ordination, and in Heb. 6, 2.

that the outward sign of entry into the Church must consist both of Baptism and of some subsequent rite; only the former is of divine institution.

Nevertheless out of a variety of practice there eventually emerged a pattern of the outward sign of entry into the Church. After a long catechumenate in which the candidate received instruction and professed the faith, there followed (i) Baptism; (ii) one or more out of a number of other rites, very variously arranged in different Churches, such as the imposition of hands, anointing with oil, and making the sign of the cross; and (iii) the first reception of Holy Communion. In the East these three parts still normally take place all on the same day, even for infants, but of course infants are not instructed and do not themselves make profession of the faith.

In the West, however, the pattern was split. Often, and eventually almost always, the second and third parts were deferred for some time after the first part, even in the case of adults. When infants were baptized, the later parts were deferred for some years. From the fifth century onwards the second part was often called *confirmation*; the meaning was that God confirms what was done at Baptism and confirms, i.e., strengthens, the candidate. The use of the word was no doubt encouraged by those scriptural passages which speak of God strengthening or 'stablishing' us. There are also passages in the writings of the early Church which refer to our confirming our confession.

Both before and after the Reformation there were further changes in the Churches of the West. The most important of these is due to the Reformers, who were generally insistent that Confirmation should be preceded by instruction and by a profession of faith. Usually this profession of faith became incorporated in the actual service of Confirmation, often in the form of the ratification or confirmation by the candidate of the vows made by others on his behalf when he was baptized as an infant. Instruction and profession of faith had originally preceded Baptism, but had gradually fallen into some neglect. The prevalence of Infant Baptism caused them to be virtually disused; it was thus a logical step to attach them (in most cases) to Confirmation.

The question what gift this service symbolizes or conveys has been much discussed. It has been widely held, largely under the influence of Acts 8. 14-17, and other references to the imposition of hands mentioned above, that Confirmation is especially connected with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Yet even when the service includes the imposition of hands, this is not being done in the same circumstances as in the New Testament instances. By studying the subsequent period when Baptism and these other rites were regularly performed on the same occasion, it is not easy to determine precisely what would be the effect of any part of the whole process if it occurred in isolation. But when, still later, the rites became separated in time, the question demanded an answer. Some have held that Confirmation is an integral part of Baptism, so that without it Baptism is virtually incomplete: Protestants generally have held this view to be unscriptural, for the sacraments instituted by our Lord in the Gospels are Baptism with water and the Lord's Supper, and not any rites or ceremonies additional to these. Some have stressed the idea of strengthening; in Confirmation prayer is made that the Holy Spirit, who is already at work in the hearts of infants and children, may grant those further gifts which are needed to strengthen the candidates for the tasks of their riper years.

The question is sometimes put in the form whether Baptism is complete in itself. It is complete in that it is the only sacrament divinely instituted for this purpose, and is in itself an effective sign of all the blessings of the new covenant; it is also, however, incomplete, as our Methodist emphasis on conversion reminds us, in that these

blessings need to be appropriated by faith; it is proleptic; it sums up that which has to be progressively realised. Thus, while we must always emphasize what God does, it is appropriate that there should be a service to supply that which the service of Infant Baptism necessarily lacks, the candidate's own profession of faith, when also prayer is made that God may in the power of the Holy Spirit both continue to bestow those blessings which He has already granted and also bestow those fresh blessings which are appropriate to one who has professed his faith. He thereby also enters a new stage in his membership of the Church.

When Methodism was a Society within the Church, it was not particularly concerned with this question. Reception into membership of the Society had originally nothing to do with Confirmation, just as the Reception of Preachers into full connexion had originally nothing to do with Ordination. But when Methodism became a Church, then the entry of previously uncommitted persons in the Methodist Society became their entry into the committed membership of Christ's Church. A service such as we have described is obviously appropriate to mark this step; but as the New Testament does not consider this precise question, we have a certain freedom in ordering its form.

CONDITIONS OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE METHODIST CHURCH

In Methodism 'membership of the Church' has two different senses: (a) the membership which is conferred at Baptism, and (b) the membership which is entered upon at the Service for the Public Reception of New Members. Indeed, as we have seen, all Churches which practise Infant Baptism have the task of relating two kinds of membership in their formularies and practice – the membership conferred by Baptism and the membership which follows personal commitment. Methodism, however, began as a Society, and was obliged to lay down the terms appropriate to membership of a Society. Thus it had to reckon, historically, with *three* kinds of membership. When it became a Church, it combined the membership of the Church which comes from personal commitment with membership of the Methodist Society, and has framed its formularies and practice accordingly. It has never cast any doubt on the membership conferred at Baptism.

The Methodist Church has laid down the conditions of the later membership in these terms: 'All persons are welcomed into membership who sincerely desire to be saved from their sins through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and evidence the same in their life and conduct, and who seek to have fellowship with Christ Himself and His people by taking up the duties and privileges of the Methodist Church' (Deed of Union, CPD p.266). It is further laid down by the Methodist Church that 'it is the privilege and duty of members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves of the two Sacraments, namely, Baptism and the Lord's Supper', and, 'as membership in the Church also involves fellowship, it is the duty of all members to seek to cultivate this in every possible way' (CPD p.5). Moreover, 'all members are expected, as far as they are able, to contribute to the funds of the Church, and to engage in some form of Christian service' (ibid.).

Thus the later membership is distinguished from the membership conferred by Baptism by three features:

- (i) The 'desire to be saved from one's sins through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ'. This is not the language always used by a boy or girl today. But if he feels a sincere desire to fulfil the purpose of God for him in his life, he will certainly become aware of his inadequacy and turn to Christ.

- (ii) 'Evidence of this in life and conduct'. This includes, among other things, the willingness to receive instruction in what a Christian believes and in the nature of the life in Christ and of the Christian hope.
- (iii) 'Seeking to have fellowship with Christ Himself and His people by taking up the duties and privileges of the Methodist Church'. In seeking this he is making a personal offering of himself to serve Christ in His Church, and particularly in the fellowship of the Methodist people.

All this culminates, after the candidate has been accepted as a member by the Leaders' Meeting, in a solemn service of Reception into Membership. In the Methodist Service for the Public Reception of New Members, as in those of other Churches which practise Infant Baptism, the following elements are of great importance:

- (a) personal commitment to Christ as Lord and Saviour and expression of the desire to serve Him in His Church;
- (b) offering of prayer that the gifts and graces which Christ by the Holy Spirit has already given may be continued, confirmed and increased by the same Spirit;⁸⁴
- (c) welcome of the member by the Church upon his entry into those privileges and duties within the Church which are appropriate to those who have committed themselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and which include the receiving of Holy Communion.

As in Holy Baptism a child is received into the Holy Catholic Church, so a member who has been publicly received is not a member of the Methodist Church only, but also of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, in which the Methodist Church holds and cherishes a true place. The words at the climax of the Service read: 'We now joyfully welcome you into the fellowship of Christ's Church'.⁸⁵

It is not appropriate for this service to be used for those who are being received by transfer from other denominations or have been confirmed in the Church of England, though some form of welcoming them should certainly be used.

THE APPROACH TO MEMBERSHIP

In Baptism a child is received into the congregation of Christ's flock, so that he may grow up within the fellowship of the Church and receive the gifts which God has in store for him. It is impossible to fix the dates at which he will reach the various stages of his spiritual development, but if he is truly cared for by those who have the responsibility for him he will enter more and more into the knowledge of Jesus Christ and of His power and grace. We have every reason to hope and pray that on Young People's Day, or on some other occasion, he will be converted by the Holy Spirit into

⁸⁴ This element is not brought into sufficient prominence by the present Service, and any revision of the Book of Offices should pay careful attention to this point, in the light of Methodist experience of inward religion, of personal awareness of Christ and of the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer.

⁸⁵ This sentence tends to obscure the importance of the relationship between Baptism and Reception into Membership. It might well be amended in a future revision of the Order of Service.

the new life in Christ; or it may be that by a series of experiences of the divine grace, no less real, he will be steadily led into that way of life. The Holy Spirit will do His work in the way that He knows to be the best.

The Methodist Church has never laid down the precise age for Reception into Membership, since spiritual development takes place in different ways with different people, and is bound up with intellectual and emotional development; moreover, the educational and social circumstances of those who are growing up vary from age to age and from place to place. In recent years it is probable that the customary age of Reception into Membership has been in the neighbourhood of sixteen to seventeen. But there is no doubt that over the country as a whole emotional development tends to be more rapid than it was, and the practice of the Church must take account of this. For the great majority of children the age of leaving school is still fifteen. For these reasons it has become highly desirable that the Church should take effective steps to train and prepare boys and girls to be received into membership at or about the age of fifteen, and sometimes at a lower age than that.

If this course is to be followed with good effect, the pastoral care of baptized children must be very greatly improved and deepened. As soon as a child is baptized the Leaders' Meeting of the Society in which he was baptized has the responsibility for his spiritual welfare and is charged with his pastoral care. It must do everything in its power, through those who are appointed for the purpose, to remind his parents of their great responsibility in the matter and help them in friendly and personal co-operation to discharge it. The Church's own agencies, and most of all the Sunday School, have the large and continuing task of training the children committed to it in prayer and worship and Bible study, and of giving imaginative instruction, as often as possible in concert with the teachers in the Day School which the children attend, in the central truths of the Bible and the faith, and in the essential principles of Christian living. They are charged with the duty of bringing home to them the privileges and duties of active, vital membership of the Church, and above all of confronting them with the claims of Jesus Christ on their whole life. With these ends in view the Church should be constantly aware of the need for teachers in the Sunday School with a real vocation for the task, and do everything in its power to recruit, train and equip them; it should never cease to support them by prayer and personal encouragement in every part of their work. Attention is drawn to the Resolution of the 1956 Conference on these matters.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ In order to raise the general standard of Sunday School teaching the Conference urges all Local Youth Councils or Sunday School Committees

- (a) to encourage all newly appointed General Superintendents and Secretaries to familiarize themselves with the training schemes of the Department and to encourage all newly appointed Departmental leaders and teachers to take the Sunday School Teachers' Diploma;
- (b) to appoint a Training Secretary to take charge of the training of all new Helpers and prospective Sunday School Teachers and Youth Leaders;
- (c) to encourage every new Sunday School Helper to take the introductory Course of training arranged by MYD;
- (d) to satisfy itself on the following points, before appointing anyone as a fully accredited teacher:
 - (i) A spiritual outlook and experience and a personal interest in the life of the Church.
 - (ii) A clear sense of the unity of the Church and School, and a willingness to serve where he can be most useful.

In rural and semi-rural circuits the pastoral care of the young is often very difficult, since the minister has the care of several Churches, and may live a long way away from those who have especial need of his help. There may be very few children in any one Society, so that is not feasible to gather them into a suitable class. It is clear from the Rural Methodism Report that, after being brought up in Methodist Sunday Schools, children are often claimed by the Church of England incumbent as candidates for confirmation, on the ground that they were baptized in the Parish Church, and after confirmation frequently do not attend either the Parish Church or the Methodist Church; some of these children, although coming from Methodist homes, have been baptized in the Parish Church because of social custom, or because the Methodist minister has seemed not to be available at the time in question.

These difficulties are not easily overcome, especially while the worshipping life of so many rural Societies lacks vitality and appeal to the young. It is clear that Methodist parents should in all cases be urged to bring their children to the Methodist Minister for Baptism, and more use could be made of the service for the Thanksgiving of Mothers. In areas where transport is reasonably easy, it is possible for the children from several village Societies to be brought together for Sunday School, for fellowship and instruction, to the Circuit Church, or to another one which is the centre of a section of the Circuit. The pastoral care of the young is an insistent task for the Minister, and he should be given all possible help and encouragement to do it thoroughly in spite of all the difficulties.

But in both town and country the success of our work, in this as in all other respects, depends on the quality of our Church life. Where worship is real, reverent and well-ordered; where prayer is regular and sincere, sensitive to the will of God and to the needs of the world; where the work and thought, the characters and lives of Church members display and adorn the Gospel which they profess; where the older people are as interested in the activities and ideas of the young as they are in their own: to such a Church children will come and bring their friends, and in such a Church they will stay.

According to an essential Methodist tradition, which springs from the doctrine of the Priesthood of all Believers, the pastoral care of all those associated with our Church, from the cradle to the grave, belongs to the whole People of God, Ministers and laymen together. Many charges are taking place in Sunday School work, the effect of which will be to link the Sunday School much more closely to the worshipping life of the whole Church. It is calamitous to suppose that youth work is the job of Sunday School teachers and other youth workers alone. It belongs to the whole Church; and the keener the personal interest taken in the children of the Church, and in the Sunday School, the greater is the probability that those who grow up in it will come to belong to it in the fullest sense. From quite an early age children should be encouraged to take part in the worship of the Church, and to give active service to it. Thus they will be more and more incorporated into its family life, and come into that experience of Jesus Christ which is the mark of a committed member of His Church.

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- (iii) Full sympathy with the evangelical aims of the work and a readiness to seek further equipment for the work through Bible reading and other studies.
 - (iv) A readiness to share in a Teachers' Training Class and to attend a District Training Conference or an Easter or Summer School.'

THE TRAINING OF MEMBERS

The Leaders' Meeting should keep in continual review the names of the children growing up in the Society, and provide for their needs at each stage of their development. Sunday School teachers have a vital part in this matter, and if the recommendations of this Report are carried out they will do more than ever before in the training of those received into the Church by Baptism.

There is a very special need for the pastoral care of children from the age at which they leave the Junior School for the Secondary School. When young people at this or a later stage sincerely desire to serve Jesus Christ, and are receiving regular instruction in the Bible and the Faith, their names should be brought before the Leaders' Meeting, and if they are approved, they should be entered as 'Members in Training', and gathered into classes which meet regularly under suitable leaders appointed by the Leaders' Meeting. The choice of the right Class Leaders for children between the ages of eleven and fourteen is of the highest importance. Part of the urgent appeal and direction of the 1956 Conference Address to the Methodist Societies runs as follows: 'Conference directs the Leaders' Meetings to ask for the name of every boy and girl of eleven to fourteen years of age in our Schools and Youth organisations and to appoint someone to be pastorally responsible for them.'⁸⁷

When it is desired to hold a service to signalise the entry of a group of children on the status of 'Members in Training,' there is available 'An Order of Service for Members in Training' (see end of this Report). This order of service makes quite clear the difference between itself and the service of 'Reception into Membership'.

The effective carrying out of this procedure for Members in Training will be arranged differently in different circumstances. It is suggested that in some cases classes in the Sunday School, or Junior Church, should be rearranged to include one for such Members; in some cases a class for Members in Training could be organized on a Circuit basis. Such a class could be held either on a Sunday or on a weekday. It is to be hoped that future Sunday School Lesson Notes can be arranged and written in such a way as to give the greatest possible help to those who are leading these classes.

The status of 'Members in Training', understood in this way and brought fully into effect under the continuous care of the Leaders' Meeting, conserves all the spiritual values for which 'Junior Membership' stands, and may avoid some of the misleading connotations which this term has in the minds of many people. It could, therefore, take the place of 'Junior Membership' in the language of the Methodist Church. Members in Training would be on Trial, and subject to the provisions of SO 268.

PREPARATION CLASSES AND PUBLIC RECEPTION

When, after a period under due pastoral care and instruction, a boy or girl is ready to express personal trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, the time has come for Public Reception into Membership. Careful and patient preparation for this event should be given in special classes, normally by the minister, and there should be no exceptions of any kind to this. It is essential that the high importance of the Service of Reception in the spiritual life of those who are to be received should be made plain both to the young people personally concerned and to the whole Church by the impressiveness, dignity and reverence of the Service. It should be so prepared for,

⁸⁷ This whole procedure should be made the subject of a Standing Order.

arranged and conducted that it remains a landmark in the experience of those who take part in it. Casualness, haste or inefficiency can easily rob it in the minds of the young of the deep significance which it ought to have. Many circuits have found that the significance of the occasion is enhanced by inviting other ministers such as the Chairman of the District and the Superintendent to take part. Often it can be made an event for the whole circuit. Others have found it useful to print the order of service with the names of those who are to be received.

When the Book of Offices is revised and the Order of Service for the Public Reception of New Members comes under review, the inclusion of a suitable and worthy act of symbolism at the point of actual reception should be seriously considered. Meanwhile the words of reception: 'In the Name of God, the giver of all grace, we now joyfully welcome you into the fellowship of Christ's Church', should be said separately to each person as he is received, and the words should be accompanied by an outward sign of welcome and blessing.

It is a disastrous mistake to act as if after Reception into Membership the pastoral care of those received can be allowed to decrease or even lapse altogether. On the contrary, it is more than ever necessary that the members of the Church growing into manhood and womanhood should be given every kind of help in fellowship classes and groups which meet regularly and include instruction, discussion and worship. The utmost care should be taken in the appointment of the leader of such a group, and he should receive the greatest possible support from the whole Church. In country circuits it may well be desirable for such groups to meet on a circuit basis; the essential thing is that they should meet, and should be effective, inspiring and vital.

THE EXERCISE OF DISCIPLINE

Membership of the Church Universal involves membership of a particular denomination. It is therefore part of Methodist discipline, which is primarily pastoral and remedial, to scrutinize regularly the list of members, to remind those who absent themselves without good cause from the means of grace that they are cutting themselves off from the fellowship of God's people, and in cases of definite refusal to accept the privileges and responsibilities of membership, to remove their names from the roll of full members of the Methodist Church; but also to seek and use all means of bringing them back into fellowship. Attention is drawn to SO 271 (1): 'Any member of the Methodist Church who without sufficient reason persistently absents himself from the Lord's Supper and from the meetings for Christian fellowship shall be visited both by his Leader and his Minister. The name of any person who by prolonged absence severs himself from Christian fellowship shall be removed from the Classbook by the Leaders' Meeting, and he shall thereupon cease to be a member of the Methodist Church'. When such people are readmitted it is not appropriate to use again the service of Public Reception.

THE PROPOSALS OF THE RURAL METHODISM REPORT

The Conference Report on Rural Methodism has this to say about 'The Effect of Anglican Confirmation':

'We are concerned with the unfortunate effects on our work of Anglican Confirmation as it affects our children in some areas. In a great many villages it is the custom to include all children of about twelve years of

age as candidates for Confirmation. Sometimes the parents of our children desire it as a social event. Sometimes pressure is brought to bear on these parents by the incumbent on the grounds that the children were baptized in the parish church – a custom which owes not a little to the difficulty of getting in touch with the distant Methodist minister, as against the ready availability of the parish priest when a mother wishes to ‘get churched’. The practical consequences of such Confirmation is that all too frequently the child breaks his connexion with us, but fails to become a regular communicant of the Anglican Church. He feels he is no longer a Methodist, but because far too often the parish priest regards his job as done and makes no further provision for his spiritual growth the child is lost to both of us’.

It is in the light of such facts as these that the proposal is made that children should be publicly received into membership at the age of twelve, after ‘a real decision accompanied by a real experience of Christ’ and ‘an adequate period for testing and due preparation’. It has further been suggested that after suitable and thorough training in the succeeding years those who have been received into membership at the age of twelve should, as adults, reaffirm their faith and claim their full status as responsible members of the Church, and at that point enter on the privileges and duties and voting rights of churchmanship.

The facts brought to the notice of the Church by the Rural Methodism Report, whether they apply to the country as a whole or only to certain parts of it, are very disturbing and call for definite and constructive action, if the life of our country Societies is to be preserved. But as they spring from the social customs of the countryside, and not from any religious or theological conviction, they do not furnish sufficient reason in themselves for holding a solemn Christian ceremony at a certain stage in a child’s life. This is justifiable only on grounds of Christian theology and experience. The ‘decision for Christ’ often made at the age of twelve or thereabouts is a fitting basis for entering on the status of ‘Members of Training’, with all that is involved. But the solemn vows of lifelong allegiance to Jesus Christ which are taken in the Service of Public Reception should be reserved to a later age; however sincere it is, the earlier decision for Christ lacks the stability and maturity of understanding which are proper to a life-long commitment. The result of widespread reception of children at the age of twelve might well be a custom purely social in its significance. Nor does there seem to be good reason for *two* services of Reception into Membership, at the age of twelve and a few years later.

The constructive Methodist policy in the difficult situation described in the Rural Methodism Report is the Christian education of Methodist children from the earliest possible age by the personal interest of the adult members of the Church, and by the careful instruction of Members in Training in the ‘privileges and duties of the Christian religion’ and in habits of prayer and worship, culminating in an impressive Service of Public Reception, and continued into adult life by the practice of Christian fellowship and service in a truly worshipping community of Christian people.

THE NAME ‘CONFIRMATION’

There is little doubt that the original intention of the Service for the Public Reception of New Members was reception into the Methodist *Society*. But the Methodist Society is now also the Methodist Church, and the intention of the Service

has now necessarily been changed, and it is widely thought of by Methodists as a service for the confirmation (properly understood) of members of the Methodist Church. The *Statement on Holy Baptism* of 1952 makes it clear that Baptism in the Methodist Church is a service of 'reception into the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church'. The membership of those 'publicly received' in the Methodist Church is membership of the same One Church.

The proper meaning of Confirmation, as it is practised in the Orthodox, Roman, Lutheran and Anglican Churches, is twofold: (a) the confirmation by the candidate for confirmation, by public confession of faith, of the membership on which he entered by Baptism; and (b) prayer that God by His Holy Spirit may complete His purposes in him by confirming, strengthening and increasing the gifts and graces which He has already given.

The present Order of Service in the Book of Offices does not fully express this meaning and intention. Nevertheless the name 'Confirmation' is allowable, so long as it is not used simply to assimilate Methodist terminology to that of other Churches.

AN ORDER OF SERVICE FOR MEMBERS IN TRAINING

This service may be used as part of Public Worship on the Lord's day, at which some of the following passages may be the Lessons: Deuteronomy 30, 15-20; Psalm 119, 9-16; Mark 1, 14-20; Ephesians 6, 10-18.

The service may begin with the hymn: 'See Jesus, Thy disciples see', or other appropriate hymn.

The congregation standing, the Minister shall say:

Dearly beloved, we purpose now to recognise as Members in Training these young people who desire to follow Jesus Christ. At their Baptism Christ received them into His flock. Their parents promised to provide a Christian home for them. The Congregation promised to maintain a fellowship in which they might grow in grace and enter more and more into their Christian inheritance. Now of their own accord they wish to serve Jesus Christ in the Church, that they may come to know Him and love Him more and more. We on our part as members of the Church wish to acknowledge afresh our responsibility to care for them, and to instruct them in the doctrines, privileges and duties of the Christian religion. And as we make or renew these vows we shall pray that the Holy Spirit may enable us to keep them, and that these young people may come to enjoy those blessings which were promised at their Baptism, and enter ever more fully into the fellowship of the Christian Church.

The Minister shall read the names of those who are to be admitted as Members in Training, and shall say to them:

Do you promise to follow Jesus Christ, your Lord and Saviour?

I do so promise, God being my helper.

Do you promise to pray and read the Bible, and to join in the worship of God on Sundays?

I do so promise, God being my helper.

Do you promise to meet regularly with others, so that you may continue to be trained as a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ?

I do so promise, God being my helper.

Then shall the Minister say:

May God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who has heard these promises, enable you to keep them. Amen.

Then shall the Minister address the Leader(s) appointed to lead the Class(es) of Members in Training:

Will you give friendship to the boys and girls whom we commend to your care, and train them with sympathy, imagination and diligence, until they are ready to accept all the privileges and responsibilities of full membership of the Church?

The Leader(s) shall reply:

I will, God being my helper.

The Minister shall say:

Members of the Church, will you endeavour to maintain here a fellowship of worship and service in the Church, that these disciples of Jesus Christ may continue to grow in the knowledge and love of God, and of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord?

The Congregation shall reply:

We will, God being our helper.

Then all present shall pray together as follows:

Thanks be to Thee, our Lord, Jesus Christ, for all the benefits Thou hast won for us, for all the pains and insults Thou hast borne for us. O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother, may we know Thee more clearly, love Thee more dearly, and follow Thee more nearly, now and ever. Amen.

Then the Minister shall say:

O heavenly Father, bless these Thy children, who have now made their vows before Thee. Grant to them that they may ever remain Thy faithful soldiers and servants, and to us who have the care of them that we may be faithful in our charge, that none of them may be lost through sin or folly. And keep us all in the company of Thy people, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Here may be sung the hymn: 'Let Him to whom we now belong'; or 'What shall I render to my God?'; or 'O Jesus, I have promised'.

(Agenda 1961, pp.34-48)

An extensive Interim Report on Church Membership had been presented to the Conference of 1960.

The Conference adopted this report omitting the section headed, 'The Name "Confirmation"'.